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Get to work on salvage

A poll finds that Oregonians support a careful policy of salvage and replanting on burned-over federal forests

A new poll shows that three out of every four Oregonians want federal forests restored after wildfires by salvaging burned trees and replanting with seedlings. The fourth, no doubt, wants to sue to stop the Forest Service from doing anything.

A June survey of 607 registered voters by an independent polling firm showed that a large majority of Oregonians still holds to the common-sense view that after fire sweeps across a forest, some blackened timber should be put to productive use, and in many cases seedlings should be planted to replace the dead trees.

But that is not how it works now. The Forest Service launches an environmental review and salvage planning process that can drag on as long as two years. The fire-killed trees start rotting. Environmental groups appeal the Forest Service salvage and recovery plan. Then they sue. By the time a judge rules, all but the largest trees are rotten to the core.

Current post-fire policy is a failure. The Forest Service spends millions of dollars writing plans for salvage and restoration projects, many of which will never happen, often because there's no money left to pay for them. Meanwhile, hundreds of millions of board feet of marketable timber are left to topple over and rot, even though rural Northwest communities are dying for jobs, even though the global demand for wood and pulp continues unabated.

It has come to this: A dead tree in the Northwest is now considered more precious than a live one about to be cut down in a poorly protected rain forest somewhere else in the world.

This page is not for a radical salvage program. The few timber industry calls for taking 2 billion board feet out of the Biscuit fire were just as ridiculous as the environmental claim that any helicopter logging of blackened trees there amounted to "clear-cutting paradise."

There are many places where timber salvage is a bad idea, where soil compaction, erosion or other damage from logging causes environmental harm that exceeds its economic benefits. Respected scientists disagree about how best to help forests recover from wildfires, and many now argue that a leave-it-alone approach is often best.

Yet there must be a thoughtful middle ground somewhere on salvage and recovery of federal forests. When a fire bums a hundred thousand acres of an Oregon forest, surely a small percentage of the burned area can be safely and promptly salvaged — before the trees rot — and certainly much of it ought to be reseeded or replanted.

The Northwest members of Congress who led the effort to pass healthy forest legislation — including Rep. Greg Walden and Sen. Gordon Smith, both R-Ore. — are now working on a similar bill to expedite timber salvage.

Skeptics keep saying that Congress won't be able to work out a deal because post-fire salvage is much more controversial than thinning to prevent forest fires. There is no public consensus on salvage, they claim.

The recent poll suggests otherwise. Oregonians know very well that fire salvage policy on federal lands is now a big waste of time, money, wood and jobs. Their elected leaders know it. The only question left is whether anybody is going to do anything about it.